

How do you explain this?

The Siege, directed by Edward Zwick, written by Lawrence Wright, Menno Meyjes and Zwick

David Walsh
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How do you explain a film as empty-headed as this? A film that displays a grasp of the workings of the American state that would be surpassed, I have no doubt, by the ordinary citizen in Osaka or Vladivostok. Such a work can only be the product of a deep commitment to intellectual superficiality and the failure over the course of an entire life to have seriously thought through a single significant problem.

The premise of *The Siege* is this: a terrorist campaign has begun in New York City, conducted by followers of a Islamic cleric who has been secretly seized in the Middle East by the US military. They are trying to win his release. The FBI, the CIA and the army get on the job. The different agencies come into conflict. After two more major blasts, which kill hundreds, the army occupies Brooklyn, setting up internment camps for young Arab-American men. One suspect is tortured and killed in custody at the hands of a semi-fascistic army officer. The terrorists prove to be former employees of the US government, part of an anti-Saddam Hussein campaign, abandoned to their fate in Iraq. FBI agents, in collaboration, more or less, with a CIA operative, come to the rescue of civil liberties, place the renegade general and his entire sinister unit under arrest and restore democracy in New York City.

The film is crude and unconvincing in nearly every aspect. It is a series of confused impressions, tidbits culled from the evening news and worked over by individuals for whom the history of the Middle East, the record of US intervention in the region and, more generally, the history of the twentieth century apparently comprise a closed book. Its supposedly critical insights into American operations are emptied of any real content by the fact that the writers and

director take as givens the essential rightness of US government policy and the legitimacy of its agencies. *The Siege* has no serious purpose, since its creators have determined at the outset to exclude any investigation of the critical issues. The film's noisiness and near hysteria are both an effort to make up for this essential lack of substance and to divert the spectator from detecting it.

Unless, of course, director Edward Zwick is simply possessed of a remarkable sense of irony. That would be one means--the most logical one--of explaining his decision to make agent Denzel Washington and his FBI colleagues crusaders for civil liberties. How do you explain it otherwise? If Zwick is not pulling our leg, you'd then have to assume that he knows nothing about the history of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, epitomized in the malignant figure of J. Edgar Hoover; its organic hostility to democratic rights; its role in the anticommunist witch-hunts; its record of surveillance and harassment of political opponents--indeed of anyone with a critical thought in his or her head, from Groucho Marx to Jean Seberg to Leonard Bernstein. Yes, if you chose to ignore an entire series of elementary political realities, theoretically you *could* come up with a film like *The Siege*.

I think this film speaks to the outlook of a considerable section of what one calls at present, for lack of a better phrase, the American intelligentsia. Born in 1952 in Winnetka, Illinois, Zwick attended Harvard University, majoring in literature. He worked as a journalist and editor for *The New Republic* and *Rolling Stone*, before breaking into television as a writer, story editor, producer and director of the series *Family* (1976-1980). His trademark seems to be a kind

of warmhearted triviality, a humaneness that extends no farther than is immediately convenient. Zwick is perhaps best known for his role as executive producer, and occasional writer and director, on the television series *thirtysomething*, that 'polished paean to yuppie angst,' in the words of one commentator, produced during the Reagan-Bush years. His feature films include *About Last Night* (1986), *Glory* (1989) (his most creditable work to date), *Legends of the Fall* (1994) and *Courage Under Fire* (1996). Zwick was also associated with the 1994 ABC series *My So-Called Life*.

There is no doubt--and this is the most absurd element of the situation--that the director considers himself a liberal or perhaps even something farther to the left. Things have reached the point in the ideological shift of certain layers of the population that opposition to military rule can be considered a radical stance. But the film's unstated assumptions! Patriotism; reverence for the forces of law and order; defense of the American way of life! These are people on whom decades of bullying and murderous US intervention around the world, as well as the transformation of social relations internally, have left no impression. (During these same decades they have prospered, perhaps beyond their wildest dreams. This is a not insignificant factor.) I defy anyone to produce serious artistic work, at this moment in history, on the basis of those conceptions. It implies such a colossal insensitivity to the human concerns that a significant artist, no matter what his or her political inclinations, must at some level hold dear.

It's impossible to account for *The Siege* simply on the basis of the director's and writers' willful ignorance. Intellectual cowardice and toadying also come into play, the desire not to offend the establishment, to curry favor. After all, these are 'major players' in the entertainment industry. Perhaps criticism is beside the point, that fate is punishment enough.

Arab-American organizations have criticized Zwick's film for its reinforcing of 'stereotypes of Muslims' and its 'linking Islam to terrorism.' (Ibrahim Hooper, national communications director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, November 10, 1998.) No doubt there's an element of truth in the accusation. *The Siege* is ignorant and vulgar in its presentation of Arabs and

Islam as it is in virtually everything else. The film, however, is not merely offensive to this or that community, but to anyone who knows anything about the world.



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